The Cartel of the Suns and the Gangster State: Evidence of State-Embedded Criminality and Transnational Operations in Venezuela

By Alan Fogelquist
Report generated with the assistance of Gemini
© 2025 Alan Fogelquist. All rights reserved.

Table of Contents

1. Introduction: The Fusion of State and Crime in Venezuela
2. Historical Trajectory and Structure of the Cartel de los Soles (CdS)
3. Evidence of Connections to the Maduro Government
4. The Convergence of State Power and Illicit Economies
5. Nexus with Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Transnational Criminal Groups
6. Regional Spillover and Operations in Neighboring Countries
7. Conclusion and Future Implications
8. MLA Style Bibliography

I. Introduction: The Fusion of State and Crime in Venezuela

Contextualizing Venezuela's Deterioration into a Gangster State

Venezuela, amidst profound political turmoil, financial collapse, and widespread institutional decay, has transitioned into an environment uniquely conducive to the operations of

transnational criminal organizations (TCOs).[1] The country's political crisis has facilitated illicit activities, including the trafficking of drugs, arms, people, and extensive illicit finance.[1] This state of affairs is underpinned by deeply embedded corruption, evident in the nation's ranking of 177th out of 180 countries in Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index.[2] Critically, the institutional framework required to address organized crime is among the world's weakest, largely due to systemic state complicity with criminals.[2]

The most prominent manifestation of this institutional failure is the **Cartel de los Soles (CdS)**, an organization comprising high-ranking members of the Venezuelan Armed Forces and government officials involved in international illicit trade.[3] The United States government maintains that Nicolás Maduro Moros is the leader of this designated narco-terrorist organization.[5] Analysts suggest that, under the current regime, political power and criminal power have merged into a unified apparatus, resulting in a "Gangster State".[7] This criminal network is not merely taxing illicit trade passively; it actively operates and controls the logistics of global organized crime using Venezuelan state institutions as its platform.[8] This reality implies that the fundamental challenge facing the international community is not solely achieving a change in political leadership, but the far more difficult task of dismantling a criminal network that has become structurally rooted in the Venezuelan state.[10]

Scope, Methodology, and Thematic Overview

This report provides a detailed analysis of the historical evolution, organizational model, and transnational alliances of the Cartel de los Soles, along with affiliated Venezuelan groups such as Tren de Aragua (TdA). The analysis is focused on substantiating the evidence linking these groups directly to the Maduro government and documenting their operational reach and impact in neighboring nations, specifically Colombia, Brazil, and Guyana. The methodology employed herein seeks to contextualize the prevailing debate surrounding the CdS's structure and the political motivations behind its designation as a narco-terrorist entity by foreign governments.

II. Historical Trajectory and Structure of the Cartel de los Soles (CdS)

Origins and Early Corruption (1990s and Pre-Chávez Era)

The genesis of the *Cartel de los Soles* dates back to the early 1990s, before the rise of the Chavista movement. The term was first used in 1993 following a United States investigation into two generals of the Venezuelan National Guard implicated in drug trafficking.[11] The organization takes its name from the "sun" insignias historically worn by high-ranking Venezuelan generals on their uniforms.[3] According to journalistic accounts, the phenomenon began when Colombian cocaine entered Venezuela through corrupt border units, signifying that the "rot moved its way up the ranks" of the military hierarchy.[3]

The Chavista Consolidation and Militarization of the State

The militarization of the Venezuelan state began in earnest around 1999 under Hugo Chávez, setting the stage for organized crime to flourish with the complicity of those in power.[10] The adoption of a 'civic-military' model under the regime led to the deep entrenchment of the Bolivarian National Armed Forces (FANB) in both political and economic sectors.[13] While initially seen as political support for the "revolution," a significant number of military individuals sought personal gain, participating in illicit activities associated with organized crime.[14]

The role of the military in narcotics traffic has undergone a critical evolution. The Venezuelan Armed Forces are now considered crucial to the Maduro regime's ability to move drugs internationally.[9] Reports indicate that the military has shifted from merely passively permitting the passage of drugs and receiving bribes to engaging in active cooperation and direct involvement with Colombian guerrillas in the process of moving drugs.[9] The Venezuelan state now functions as a high-level logistics provider, utilizing military assets, ports, airports, and clandestine airstrips to ensure continuous drug flow.[8]

The Defining Debate: Centralized Cartel vs. Decentralized Network

The precise organizational nature of the Cartel de los Soles remains a subject of expert contention. U.S. authorities consistently designate the CdS as a unified, Venezuela-based criminal group headed by Nicolás Maduro Moros and other high-ranking regime insiders.[5] However, many analysts suggest that the CdS is not a centrally coordinated, hierarchical

cartel, but rather a descriptive term for a diffuse, loose network of competing drug-trafficking entities operating

within state institutions.[3]

This diffuse nature has been characterized as an "atypical cartel" or, conversely, a "Super Cartel," defined by criminal convergence.[8] This network features ministers, generals, and presidential staff who are integral parts of the structure, eliminating the traditional need for bribes by operating directly from the highest echelons of power.[8] A defining feature of this criminal enterprise is its high complexity and decentralization, operating in interconnected cells. This structure offers institutionalized impunity and redundancy, ensuring that even if certain members are captured or removed, the operations of the network remain uninterrupted.[8]

The institutionalization of criminal power extends to the highest levels of the state security apparatus. Hugo Armando Carvajal Barrios, the former director of Venezuela's military intelligence agency (Direccion de Inteligencia Militar or DIM), pleaded guilty to acting as a leader and manager of the Cartel de los Soles.[16] This case confirms that the state's most sophisticated surveillance and defense capabilities were utilized to coordinate and protect drug shipments and facilitate narco-terrorism efforts.[16] By accessing state databases and diplomatic systems (embassies and foreign ministries), the decentralized network is equipped to operate with the sophistication of a "global corporation".[8]

Furthermore, the framing of the CdS itself is subject to geopolitical dispute. While the involvement of high-ranking Venezuelan military personnel in drug trafficking is extensively documented, critics of the U.S. government argue that the specific allegations regarding the existence of a centralized cartel are a form of political propaganda designed primarily to delegitimize the government of Nicolás Maduro.[3]

III. Evidence of Connections to the Maduro Government

The direct implication of high-ranking Venezuelan officials in international drug trafficking and narco-terrorism is evidenced by extensive legal actions taken by the U.S. government, linking the criminal network directly to the presidential inner circle.

The Indictment of Nicolás Maduro and Diosdado Cabello

Nicolás Maduro Moros is currently indicted in the Southern District of New York (SDNY) for his alleged role in a corrupt and violent narco-terrorism conspiracy.[6] The U.S. Department of State has refused to recognize Maduro as Venezuela's legitimate head of state since 2019 and considers him the leader of the designated narco-terrorist organization Cartel de los Soles.[5] A reward of up to $50 million is offered for information leading to his arrest, framing him publicly not as a dictator, but as the chief of a criminal network connected to Mexican and Colombian forces.[12]

Diosdado Cabello Rondón, a former Vice-President, active military Captain, and current high-ranking official, is also indicted as a key figure in the CdS narco-terrorism conspiracy.[17] Specific allegations against Cabello include coordinating with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) to transport and distribute massive cocaine shipments, providing heavily armed security to protect these shipments, selling large quantities of previously seized cocaine back to drug traffickers for millions of dollars, and interfering with ongoing drug-trafficking investigations within Venezuela.[19]

The Narco-Terrorism Nexus: Tareck El Aissami and Tren de Aragua

The U.S. Treasury Department's Office of Foreign Assets Control (OFAC) has sanctioned the Cartel de los Soles as a Specially Designated Global Terrorist (SDGT) for providing material support to other Foreign Terrorist Organizations (FTOs), notably the Venezuelan gang Tren de Aragua (TdA) and the Mexican Sinaloa Cartel.[15] This designation shifts the legal and military response from standard counter-narcotics efforts to counter-terrorism operations. The rationale is that the regime utilizes drug trafficking as a political weapon in a strategy of asymmetric warfare, seeking not only financial profit but also the destabilization of democratic nations, particularly the United States.[8] This strategic framework was used to justify military actions, such as U.S. strikes against alleged Venezuelan-linked drug vessels in the Caribbean.[22]

Tareck El Aissami, a former Vice President, was previously designated as a Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker. TdA, which originated as a Venezuelan prison gang [23], is closely aligned with the Maduro regime and has reportedly infiltrated its military and law enforcement apparatus.[21] The organization saw significant growth and expansion while El Aissami served as governor of Aragua between 2012 and 2017.[21] U.S. authorities contend that the CdS relies on TdA and similar organizations to achieve its objective of weaponizing illegal

narcotics to "flood" the United States.[21]

The Narcosobrinos Affair: Familial State-Crime Links

Tangible evidence of drug trafficking extending to the President's immediate family emerged in the high-profile case of the *Narcosobrinos* affair. Efraín Antonio Campo Flores and Franqui Francisco Flores de Freitas, nephews of First Lady Cilia Flores, were arrested in 2015 for conspiring to traffic cocaine into the United States.[24] The operation involved plans to ship FARC-produced cocaine and was allegedly intended to generate $20 million to finance Cilia Flores' congressional campaign.[24]

Crucially, testimony and evidence presented at the trial confirmed the complicity of state infrastructure in their scheme. The two were planning to use Terminal 4 of the Simon Bolivar Airport—a facility reserved exclusively for the President—for their illicit operations.[26] Despite being sentenced to 18 years in federal prison in 2017 [24], both individuals were subsequently released in October 2022 as part of a strategic prisoner swap with the U.S. government.[24] While the guilty verdict provided concrete legal validation of the familial links to state-enabled trafficking, their release demonstrates the Maduro regime's success in leveraging its control over political hostages (such as the CITGO executives) to secure the freedom of key criminal family members, thereby reinforcing the power of the criminal state apparatus.

Table 1: Key Venezuelan Officials and Their Designated Roles in the Cartel de los Soles

Official	**Alleged Primary Role in CdS / Organization**	**Key U.S. Designations/Indictments**	**Citations**
Nicolás Maduro Moros	Leader/Manager of CdS, Narco-Terrorism Conspiracy	Indicted (SDNY), SDGT Designation, $50M Reward Offer	5
Diosdado Cabello Rondón	Leader/Manager of CdS, Coordinator of FARC Conspiracy	Indicted (SDNY), OFAC Sanctioned, $25M Reward Offer	17

Hugo Carvajal Barrios	Former Director of DIM (Military Intelligence)	Leader/Manager of CdS, Pleaded Guilty to Narco-Terrorism	[16]
Tareck El Aissami	Alleged CdS Member, Facilitated Tren de Aragua Expansion	Specially Designated Narcotics Trafficker (Kingpin Act), OFAC Sanctioned	[3]

IV. The Convergence of State Power and Illicit Economies

The resilience and functional longevity of the Venezuelan Gangster State derive from its successful strategy of diversifying illicit revenue streams and embedding the military in the control and operation of these economies.

Cocaine Trafficking: Venezuela as a Primary Transit Hub

Venezuela has established itself as a major transit country for cocaine, utilizing aerial, terrestrial, and maritime routes to move shipments from Colombia to global markets.[1] An estimated 210 metric tons of cocaine passed through Venezuelan territory in 2018.[28] The CdS coordinates multi-ton shipments of FARC-produced cocaine, typically destined for the United States and Europe.[6] DTOs, including Venezuelan and Colombian organizations, employ sophisticated maritime conveyances such as container ships, commercial fishing vessels, and increasingly, self-propelled semisubmersibles (SPSSs) to transport the narcotics, often concealing them within hidden compartments or commingling them with legitimate commercial goods.[29]

The epicenter of these operations is often the Catatumbo borderland region, a strategically vital area rich in coca production between Venezuela and Colombia.[9] Here, the Venezuelan Armed Forces are actively involved in moving drugs, cooperating directly with Colombian guerrillas, rather than simply accepting protection payments, indicating a deep operational

integration.[9]

The Illicit Gold Economy: The Arco Minero and Money Laundering

Illegal mining, particularly of gold in Venezuela's southern states of Bolívar and Amazonas, has surged dramatically over the past decade and is controlled by criminal groups, *sindicatos*, and Colombian guerrillas.[30] The Maduro regime has leveraged state enterprises and security forces not to stop this activity, but to actively

legitimize otherwise criminal mineral extraction, collaborating with criminal groups to mine, process, and transport the minerals.[31]

The illicit gold economy is financially crucial because gold functions as a highly efficient mechanism for money laundering. Unlike cash derived from drug sales, gold is difficult to trace to its source and is easier to transact in global markets.[1] The reliance on illicit gold intensified following U.S. sanctions imposed on the oil sector, making gold trafficking a central pillar of the regime's current financial stability and sanctions circumvention strategy.[33]

Illicitly mined Venezuelan gold is smuggled into neighboring countries, including Colombia, Brazil, and Guyana, where it is often fraudulently legalized before entering the global market.[31] It is also exported directly by the Central Bank of Venezuela to strategic autocratic allies, notably Turkey, Iran, the UAE, and East Asia, providing a crucial lifeline of revenue bypassing Western sanctions.[1] This reliance on high-value, easily transacted commodities like gold and drug transit fees ensures the regime's continuous financial viability despite international pressure.

The human cost of this economy is severe. Criminal groups that control the mining camps enforce their own rules through violence and extortion, leading to widespread human rights abuses, including child labor, human trafficking, sexual exploitation, and lethal environmental hazards like mercury contamination.[34]

Oil Sector Corruption (PDVSA): Embezzlement and Financial Fraud

While the prominence of gold and drugs has risen, the state-owned oil company, Petróleos de Venezuela, S.A. (PdVSA), served historically as the primary vehicle for corruption and embezzlement.[36] Long before the imposition of U.S. sanctions, the Venezuelan economy, and

the oil sector in particular, was ravaged by pervasive corruption, kleptocracy, and disregard for critical infrastructure.[37] Schemes designed to defraud and launder funds embezzled from PdVSA exceeded $1.2 billion, involving high-level Venezuelan officials, many from the military.[36]

The oil proceeds, alongside illicit gold revenues, form major sources of income that are disguised through international money laundering routes via the Caribbean, the Middle East, and Asia.[1] However, the economic decline of Venezuela pre-dates the 2017 and 2019 sanctions, with endemic corruption being the key accelerant of the sector's destruction.[37] Corruption, therefore, is not merely a consequence of state weakness, but a sophisticated, systemic strategy of political control. The deep involvement of the FANB in controlling these illicit and legal economic sectors ensures the military's loyalty through continuous profit-sharing and sustained impunity, securing the regime's political survival.[13]

V. Nexus with Foreign Terrorist Organizations and Transnational Criminal Groups

The Cartel of the Suns acts as a logistical bridgehead, linking South American drug production and illicit resources to global criminal and geopolitical partners by weaponizing state infrastructure.

Colombian Irregular Armed Groups (FARC Dissidents/ELN)

The Maduro regime maintains a policy of tolerance and selective cooperation with Colombian-origin U.S.-designated terrorist groups, notably the National Liberation Army (ELN) and FARC dissidents (FARC-D), providing them with critical safe haven within Venezuelan territory.[2] Colombian authorities estimate that roughly 1,400 active members of the ELN are based in Venezuela, utilizing 36 strategically located camps near the border.[42] The ELN has expanded its presence into 40 Venezuelan municipalities across eight states.[41]

These groups maintain a symbiotic relationship with Venezuelan military and security officials, allowing them to facilitate and protect routes for drug trafficking, human trafficking, and illicit mining operations.[2] Their main funding sources have increasingly shifted toward illicit economies within Venezuela, especially drugs and illegal mining.[43] The regime essentially manages these foreign armed groups, outsourcing military control of border regions and key

illicit economies (like the Catatumbo drug hub and southern gold fields) in exchange for operational stability and a share of the criminal profits.[2] Violence often erupts when factions, such as those seen in the 2022 conflicts between rival FARC-D groups in Apure state, violate established trafficking and resource control agreements with regime officials.[2]

Mexican Cartel Alliances (Sinaloa Cartel)

The Cartel of the Suns provides direct material support to the Sinaloa Cartel, one of the oldest and most powerful Mexican transnational criminal organizations and a U.S.-designated FTO.[15] The Sinaloa Cartel is responsible for trafficking a significant portion of fentanyl, methamphetamine, cocaine, and other deadly illicit drugs into the United States from Mexico.[15]

The strategic partnership is based on logistics and transit. The CdS's primary value is its ability to ensure the safe and efficient transit of high-volume South American cocaine through Venezuelan territory, providing military protection, non-response from air defense, and high-level diplomatic cover.[8] This specialized state-protection service enables the Sinaloa Cartel to focus on northward distribution and market control, rather than competing for access to source countries, making the CdS an essential link in the global drug supply chain.

Geopolitical Allies and Illicit Finance: Iran and Hezbollah

Beyond traditional drug cartels, the Maduro regime has established connections with geopolitical actors linked to illicit finance. Reports indicate that Iran-backed networks, particularly Hezbollah, exploit Maduro's Venezuela, providing mutual benefits.[46] This connection allows Hezbollah a secure operational space to conduct "global crime-terror operations" while furnishing the Maduro regime with illicit financial and material support from the Middle East, further helping to sustain the regime against international pressure.[47]

VI. Regional Spillover and Operations in Neighboring Countries

The institutional collapse and rise of state-embedded crime in Venezuela have generated profound instability, exporting Venezuelan criminal influence across the hemisphere.

Colombia: Persistent Border Conflict and Criminal Dynamics

Colombia remains directly impacted by the Venezuelan Gangster State model. FARC dissidents and ELN members continue to regard Venezuelan territory as an essential safe haven and operational base, particularly along the 1,370-mile border.[2] This arrangement, actively managed by the FANB, ensures the continuous flow of Colombian cocaine, particularly from the Catatumbo region, through Venezuelan air and maritime corridors.[9] The continuous presence of these irregular armed groups on the Venezuelan side of the border generates persistent security challenges and localized violence in Colombian frontier regions.[42]

Brazil: The Expanding Footprint of Venezuelan Crime

The crisis has directly facilitated the rapid, transnational expansion of Tren de Aragua (TdA) across South America. TdA, designated as a significant Transnational Criminal Organization (TCO) by the U.S. Treasury, has infiltrated regions across the continent, utilizing the massive outflow of Venezuelan migrants as cover for human smuggling and trafficking operations.[23] TdA preys upon vulnerable migrant women and children, extending its criminal reach via these migration routes.[23]

TdA maintains a sporadic, but significant, presence in Brazil, and has formed strategic alliances with powerful local criminal organizations, notably the Primeiro Comando da Capital (PCC).[48] TdA generates revenue through a diverse range of criminal activities, including illegal mining, extortion, drug trafficking, and kidnapping, posing a deadly criminal threat to local communities throughout the region.[23] The organization’s expansion is, in effect, a low-cost, state-sanctioned export of a criminal network that directly destabilizes adjacent nations.

Guyana: Conflict over Resources and Criminal Infiltration

Venezuela's institutionalized criminality has a critical impact on its eastern neighbor, Guyana,

particularly along the contested border. Venezuelan crime syndicates, known locally as *sindicatos*, control extensive resource-rich territories in Bolívar state, running illegal mining operations right up to the Guyanese border.[44] These

sindicatos have been linked to violence, including the murders of Guyanese miners.[44]

The threat to Guyana is compounded by the fact that illegal gold mining and narcotics trafficking are operationally contiguous; gold is the preferred method for laundering drug proceeds.[32] Venezuelan criminal rings, alongside groups like the ELN, are vying for territorial control over these resource-rich mining zones.[44] This confluence of drug routes, illegal gold exploitation, and corresponding human rights abuses has prompted Guyana to actively characterize the Maduro regime as a "narco-terrorist" entity, recognizing the criminal operations as a direct threat intertwined with the broader territorial dispute.[50]

Table 2: Major Venezuelan Organized Criminal Groups and Transnational Scope

Group	**Primary Affiliation/Structure**	**Core Illicit Activities**	**Key Transnational Operational Presence**
Cartel de los Soles (CdS)	High-ranking Venezuelan Armed Forces/Government Officials	Drug Trafficking (Cocaine), Arms Trafficking, Money Laundering, Illegal Mining	US (Florida/Texas), Colombia, Mexico (Sinaloa Cartel alliance), Iran/Hezbollah facilitation
Tren de Aragua (TdA)	Venezuela-based Transnational Criminal Organization (Prison Gang Origin)	Human Trafficking/Smuggling, Extortion, Illegal Mining, Drug Trafficking	Colombia, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Bolivia, Brazil (PCC alliance)
FARC Dissidents (FARC-D)	Colombian Guerrilla Remnants (Segunda Marquetalia, FARC-EP)	Drug cultivation/taxation, Drug trafficking, Illegal Mining	Venezuela (Safe Haven, Apure border regions), Colombia
National Liberation	Colombian Guerrilla	Extortion, Drug	Venezuela (Safe

Army (ELN)	Group	Trafficking, Illegal Mining	Haven, 40+ municipalities), Colombia

VII. Conclusion and Future Implications

The existence and operations of the Cartel of the Suns demonstrate a fundamental and devastating colonization of the Venezuelan state by organized crime, achieving a political-criminal merger that historically eluded figures like Pablo Escobar.[7] The decentralized, cell-based structure of the CdS, fortified by access to state resources, military intelligence, and diplomatic channels, grants the network immense operational continuity and resistance to targeted efforts aimed at decapitation.[8]

Financially, the regime's reliance has strategically shifted. The endemic corruption that predated sanctions destroyed the legitimate oil sector, forcing the regime to rely heavily on high-value illicit commodities—namely gold and drug transit fees—to secure financial stability and circumvent international pressure.[33] This criminal funding system ensures the loyalty of the armed forces through profit-sharing, embedding corruption as a core strategy for political control.[14]

The implications for regional security are severe. Venezuela has become a critical operational bridge connecting South American drug production (FARC/ELN) to global distribution networks (Sinaloa Cartel), generating instability across its frontiers.[15] The rapid expansion of TdA, facilitated by alliances with Brazilian gangs (PCC) and fueled by the migrant crisis, constitutes an exportable threat that continues to destabilize the social and security landscape of neighboring countries, including Colombia, Brazil, and Guyana.[23] Ultimately, addressing the Venezuelan crisis requires a strategy focused not only on political leverage but on the complex, long-term dismantling of the criminal infrastructure that has seized control of the state itself.[10]

VIII. MLA Style Bibliography

"Cartel of the Suns." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024..[3]

"Cartel de los Soles." *Cuba Center*, 5 Aug. 2021..[11]

"Treasury Sanctions Venezuelan Cartel Headed by Maduro." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 25 July 2025..[15]

"Standing with the Venezuelan People One Year After Yet Another Sham Election." *U.S. Department of State*, 28 July 2025..[5]

"Former Venezuelan General Pleads Guilty to Narco-Terrorism, Weapons, and Drug Trafficking." *U.S. Department of Justice*, 2024..[16]

"Reward Offer Increase of Up to $50 Million for Information Leading to Arrest and/or Conviction of Nicolás Maduro." *U.S. Department of State*, 5 Aug. 2025..[18]

"Nicolás Maduro Moros." *U.S. Department of State*..[6]

"The Cartel of the Suns: The criminal network pitting the US against Venezuela." *El País*, 8 Sept. 2025..[12]

"Invocation of the Alien Enemies Act Regarding the Invasion of the United States by Tren de Aragua." *The White House*, 2025..[21]

"Stephen Miller in Turnberry, Scotland, on 28 July." *The Guardian*, 29 Sept. 2025..[52]

Oliveros, Alejandro. "Beyond the Narcostate Narrative: Venezuela Report." *WOLA*, 2020..[28]

Oliveros, Alejandro. "What You Should Understand About the Cartel de los Soles." *Caracas Chronicles*, 26 Sept. 2025..[50]

"Drug Trafficking: A Prime Source of Financing for Venezuela's Maduro Regime." *Army University Press*, 2024..[9]

"Colombian FARC and ELN Insurgency and the Drug Trade." *National Security Archive*, 2000..[53]

"ELN and ex-FARC have 1,700 troops in Venezuela, with a third local recruits." *University of Navarra*, 2024..[43]

"Tren de Aragua." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024..[49]

"Treasury Sanctions Tren de Aragua as a Significant Transnational Criminal Organization." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 2024..[23]

"The Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South." *Crisis Group*, 2020..[30]

"Illegal Mining in Venezuela: Death and Devastation in Amazonas and Orinoco Regions." *CSIS*, 2021..[31]

"Designation of International Cartels." *U.S. Department of State*, 2024..[48]

"Venezuela." *State.gov*, 2016..[27]

"What to know about Trump's war on drug trafficking from Venezuela." *Atlantic Council*, 2025..[54]

"The Movement of Illegal Drugs into the United States." *National Drug Intelligence Center*, 2002..[29]

"QA: Tension Between Venezuela and the United States: Between Truth and Theater." *WOLA*, 2020..[10]

Pérez, Juan C. "Organized Crime in Venezuela." *Military Review*, 2016..[14]

"Militarisation, Corruption, and Democracy in Venezuela." *Transparency International Defence and Security*, 2024..[13]

"Venezuela's Political Unrest Has Made Drug Trafficking, Money Laundering, and Other Crimes Easier." *GAO WatchBlog*, 2023..[1]

Ríos, Vanda. "How Venezuela Became a Gangster State." *Journal of Democracy*, 25 July 2025..[7]

Brownfield, William, and Juan Zarate. *Venezuela Escalation into a Hub of Organized Crime*. CSIS Americas, 2024..[55]

"Diosdado Cabello Rondón." *U.S. Department of State*..[19]

"Treasury Designates Key Figures in Diosdado Cabello's Corruption Network." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 2018..[20]

"United States of America v. Campo and Flores." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024..[26]

"Narcosobrinos affair." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024..[24]

"Nephews Of Venezuela First Lady Each Sentenced To 18 Years In Prison For Conspiring To Import Cocaine Into The United States." *DEA*, 2017..[25]

"Former Member of Venezuelan National Assembly Charged with Narco-Terrorism, Drug Trafficking and Weapons Offenses." *DEA*, 2020..[56]

Superseding Indictment: United States v. Nicolás Maduro Moros, et al. S.D.N.Y., March 2020..[17]

Gold and Grief: Venezuela's Violent South. Crisis Group, 2019..[44]

Addressing Illegal Mining and Narcotrafficking: Hearing before the Subcommittee on the Western Hemisphere. U.S. House of Representatives, 2019..[32]

Venezuelan Blood Gold and the United States: A Gold Rush Fueled by Corruption and Crime. Brookings Institution, 2022..[33]

"UN: Venezuela Doing Little to Stop Criminal Groups, Abuses." *VOA News*, 2021..[34]

The Cartel of the Suns is Not a Common Cartel, but a True "Super Cartel." Iván Simonovis, 2024..[8]

Ríos, Vanda. "Political Decentralization and Organized Crime." *Harvard University*, 2016..[57]

Warships vs. the Cartel of the Suns. Alerta Venezuela, 2025..[58]

"Sinaloa Cartel." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024..[59]

"Under Secretary Hurley Visits Border and Sanctions Top Sinaloa Cartel Faction." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 2025..[45]

"Cartels." *DEA*..[60]

"Politifact: Trump Venezuela boat strikes drugs trafficking." *Politifact*, 22 Sept. 2025..[61]

"2025 United States strikes on Venezuelan boats." *Wikipedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, 2024..[22]

"Cartel connection: Hezbollah and Iran exploit Maduro's Venezuela for cocaine cash." *Fox News*, 2024..[46]

"The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-Backed Networks Prop Up the Venezuelan Regime." *Atlantic Council*, 2024..[47]

"Venezuela: Political and Economic Crisis and U.S. Policy." *Congressional Research Service*, 2022..[2]

"Treasury Sanctions Venezuela's State-Owned Oil Company Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A." *U.S. Department of the Treasury*, 2019..[36]

"The Maduro Regime's Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America." *Atlantic Council*, 2019..[40]

"Apocalypse Now: Venezuela, Oil, and Reconstruction." *Harvard Kennedy School*, 2017..[38]

Oliveros, Alejandro. "Pre-Sanctions Venezuela." *WOLA*, 2020..[39]

"The Role of the Oil Sector in Venezuela's Environmental Degradation and Economic Rebuilding." *CSIS*, 2023..[37]

The truth behind Tren de Aragua. InSight Crime, 2024..[62]

"Colombia Country Reports on Terrorism 2019." *U.S. Department of State*, 2020..[42]

"Venezuela Country Reports on Terrorism 2022." *U.S. Department of State*, 2023..[41]

"Venezuela 2022 Human Rights Report." *U.S. Department of State*, 2023..[35]

Works cited

1. Venezuela's Political Unrest Has Made Drug Trafficking, Money Laundering, and Other Crimes Easier | U.S. GAO - Government Accountability Office, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.gao.gov/blog/venezuelas-political-unrest-has-made-drug-trafficking-money-laundering-and-other-crimes-easier
2. Venezuela: Background and U.S. Relations - Congress.gov, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R44841
3. Cartel of the Suns - Wikipedia, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartel_of_the_Suns
4. accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cartel_of_the_Suns#:~:text=The%20Cartel%20of%20the%20Suns,involved%20in%20international%20drug%20trade.
5. Standing with the Venezuelan People: One Year After Yet Another Sham Election, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/releases/office-of-the-spokesperson/2025/07/standing-with-the-venezuelan-people-one-year-after-yet-another-sham-election
6. Nicolás Maduro Moros - United States Department of State, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/nicolas-maduro-moros
7. How Venezuela Became a Gangster State | Journal of Democracy, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/online-exclusive/how-venezuela-became-a-gangster-state/
8. VENEZUELAN NARCOTATE: We reveal how the Cartel of the Suns is a geopolitical weapon | 25% of the - YouTube, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ELQBg7CIshM

9. Drug Trafficking A Prime Source Of Financing For Venezuela's Maduro Regime, accessed September 29, 2025, https://oe.tradoc.army.mil/product/drug-trafficking-a-prime-source-of-financing-for-venezuelas-maduro-regime/
10. Q&A: Tension between Venezuela and the United States: between truth and theater - WOLA, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.wola.org/analysis/qa-tension-between-venezuela-and-the-united-states-between-truth-and-theater/
11. Cartel de Soles - Center for Free Cuba, accessed September 29, 2025, https://cubacenter.org/publications/2021/08/05/cartel-de-soles/
12. The Cartel of the Suns, the criminal network pitting the US against Venezuela | International, accessed September 29, 2025, https://english.elpais.com/international/2025-09-08/the-cartel-of-the-suns-the-criminal-network-pitting-the-us-against-venezuela.html
13. Militarisation, corruption, and democracy in Venezuela, accessed September 29, 2025, https://ti-defence.org/venezuela-elections-2024-military-corruption-democracy/
14. Criminal Networks in Venezuela - Army University Press, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Portals/7/military-review/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20160228_art012.pdf
15. Treasury Sanctions Venezuelan Cartel Headed by Maduro, accessed September 29, 2025, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0207
16. Southern District of New York | Former Venezuelan General Pleads Guilty To Narco-Terrorism, Weapons, And Drug Trafficking Charges | United States Department of Justice, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/former-venezuelan-general-pleads-guilty-narco-terrorism-weapons-and-drug-trafficking
17. United States v. Nicolas Maduro Moros, Case No. 1:11-CR-205: Superseding Indi - Department of Justice, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/opa/page/file/1261806/dl?inline
18. Reward Offer Increase of Up to $50 Million for Information Leading to Arrest and/or Conviction of Nicolás Maduro - U.S. Department of State, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reward-offer-increase-of-up-to-50-million-for-information-leading-to-arrest-and-or-conviction-of-nicolas-maduro
19. Diosdado Cabello Rondón - United States Department of State, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/diosdado-cabello-rondon
20. Treasury Targets Influential Former Venezuelan Official and His Corruption Network, accessed September 29, 2025, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm0389
21. Invocation of the Alien Enemies Act Regarding the Invasion of The United States by Tren De Aragua - The White House, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/03/invocation-of-the-alien-enemies-act-regarding-the-invasion-of-the-united-states-by-tren-de-aragua/

22. 2025 United States strikes on Venezuelan boats - Wikipedia, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2025_United_States_strikes_on_Venezuelan_boats
23. Treasury Sanctions Tren de Aragua as a Transnational Criminal Organization, accessed September 29, 2025, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/jy2459
24. Narcosobrinos affair - Wikipedia, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Narcosobrinos_affair
25. Nephews Of Venezuela First Lady Each Sentenced To 18 Years In Prison For Conspiring To Import Cocaine Into The United States - DEA.gov, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2017/12/15/nephews-venezuela-first-lady-each-sentenced-18-years-prison-conspiring
26. United States of America v. Campo and Flores - Wikipedia, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_of_America_v._Campo_and_Flores
27. accessed September 29, 2025, https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/inl/rls/nrcrpt/2016/vol1/253323.htm#:~:text=Venezuela%20remains%20a%20major%20transit,from%20Venezuelan%20states%20bordering%20Colombia.
28. Beyond the Narcostate Narrative: What U.S. Drug Trade Monitoring Data Says About Venezuela - WOLA, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.wola.org/analysis/beyond-the-narcostate-narrative-venezuela-report/
29. Drug Movement Into and Within the United States - Department of Justice, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.justice.gov/archive/ndic/pubs38/38661/movement.htm
30. A Curse of Gold: Mining and Violence in Venezuela's South | International Crisis Group, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/andes/venezuela/b53-curse-gold-mining-and-violence-venezuelas-south
31. Illegal Mining in Venezuela: Death and Devastation in the Amazonas and Orinoco Regions, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/illegal-mining-venezuela-death-and-devastation-amazonas-and-orinoco-regions
32. - ILLICIT MINING: THREATS TO U.S. NATIONAL SECURITY AND INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS - GovInfo, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CHRG-116shrg40426/html/CHRG-116shrg40426.htm
33. Venezuela's gold: 10 ways to address illicit financial flows from the mineral trade | Brookings, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.brookings.edu/articles/venezuelas-gold-10-ways-to-address-illicit-financial-flows-from-the-mineral-trade/
34. UN: Venezuela Doing Little to Stop Criminal Groups' Abuses - VOA, accessed September 29, 2025,

https://www.voanews.com/a/americas_un-venezuela-doing-little-stop-criminal-groups-abuses/6192810.html
35. 2022 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices: Venezuela - State Department, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/venezuela/
36. Treasury Sanctions Venezuela's State-Owned Oil Company Petroleos de Venezuela, S.A., accessed September 29, 2025, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sm594
37. The Role of the Oil Sector in Venezuela's Environmental Degradation and Economic Rebuilding - CSIS, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.csis.org/analysis/role-oil-sector-venezuelas-environmental-degradation-and-economic-rebuilding
38. APOCALYPSE NOW: VENEZUELA, OIL AND RECONSTRUCTION | The Growth Lab, accessed September 29, 2025, https://growthlab.hks.harvard.edu/files/growthlab/files/cgepapocalypsenowvenezuelaoilandreconstruction7_17_1.pdf
39. The Impact of Financial and Oil Sanctions on the Venezuelan Economy - Washington Office on Latin America | WOLA, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.wola.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Oliveros-report-summary-ENG.pdf
40. The Maduro Regime's Illicit Activities: A Threat to Democracy in Venezuela and Security in Latin America - Atlantic Council, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-regimes-illicit-activities-a-threat-to-democracy-in-venezuela-and-security-in-latin-america/
41. Country Reports on Terrorism 2022: Venezuela, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2022/venezuela/
42. Colombia - United States Department of State, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/reports/country-reports-on-terrorism-2019/colombia__trashed
43. The bi-national Colombian-Venezuelan guerrilla character provides the Maduro regime with another shock force in the face of external military harassment or a coup d'état. -. Global Affairs and Strategic Studies. School of Law - Universidad de Navarra, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.unav.edu/en/web/global-affairs/detalle/-/blogs/el-eln-y-las-exfarc-cuentan-con-1-700-efectivos-en-venezuela-con-un-tercio-de-reclutas-locales?_com_liferay_blogs_web_portlet_BlogsPortlet_redirect=https%3A%2F%2Fen.unav.edu%2Fen%2Fweb%2Fglobal-affairs%2Fdetalle%3Fp_p_id%3Dcom_liferay_blogs_web_portlet_BlogsPortlet%26p_p_lifecycle%3D0%26p_p_state%3Dmaximized%26p_p_mode%3Dview%26_com_liferay_blogs_web_portlet_BlogsPortlet_cur%3D14%26_com_liferay_blogs_web_portlet_BlogsPortlet_delta%3D10%26p_r_p_resetCur%3Dfalse%26p_r_p_categoryId%3D0
44. Gold and Grief in Venezuela's Violent South | International Crisis Group, accessed September 29, 2025,

https://www.crisisgroup.org/latin-america-caribbean/venezuela/073-gold-and-grief-venezuelas-violent-south
45. Treasury Sanctions Powerful Faction of the Terrorist Sinaloa Cartel, accessed September 29, 2025, https://home.treasury.gov/news/press-releases/sb0252
46. Cartel connection: Hezbollah and Iran exploit Maduro's Venezuela for cocaine cash, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.foxnews.com/world/cartel-connection-hezbollah-iran-exploit-maduros-venezuela-cocaine-cash
47. The Maduro-Hezbollah Nexus: How Iran-backed Networks Prop up the Venezuelan Regime, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/the-maduro-hezbollah-nexus-how-iran-backed-networks-prop-up-the-venezuelan-regime/
48. Designation of International Cartels - United States Department of State, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.state.gov/designation-of-international-cartels
49. Tren de Aragua - Wikipedia, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tren_de_Aragua
50. What You Should Understand About the Cartel de los Soles - Caracas Chronicles, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.caracaschronicles.com/2025/09/26/what-you-should-understand-about-the-cartel-de-los-soles/
51. Treasury Sanctions Venezuelan Cartel Headed by Maduro - U.S. Embassy in Chile, accessed September 29, 2025, https://cl.usembassy.gov/treasury-sanctions-venezuelan-cartel-headed-by-maduro/
52. Stephen Miller takes leading role in strikes on alleged Venezuelan drug boats, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/sep/29/stephen-miller-venezuela-drug-boat-strike
53. Drug Intelligence Report - The National Security Archive, accessed September 29, 2025, https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB69/col33.pdf
54. What to know about Trump's war on drug trafficking from Venezuela - Atlantic Council, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/new-atlanticist/what-to-know-about-trumps-war-on-drug-trafficking-from-venezuela/
55. Venezuela as a Narco State - YouTube, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=btAxTqbtGtA
56. Former member of Venezuelan National Assembly charged with narco-terrorism, drug trafficking and weapons offenses - DEA.gov, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.dea.gov/press-releases/2020/05/27/former-member-venezuelan-national-assembly-charged-narco-terrorism-drug
57. How Government Structure Encourages Criminal Violence: The causes of Mexico's Drug War - Scholars at Harvard, accessed September 29, 2025, https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/vrios/files/rioscontreras_gsas.harvard_0084l_107

52.pdf
58. Warships vs. the Cartel of the Suns - Venezuela Alert, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.alertavenezuela.org/warships-vs-the-cartel-of-the-suns/
59. Sinaloa Cartel - Wikipedia, accessed September 29, 2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sinaloa_Cartel
60. Cartels | DEA.gov, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.dea.gov/cartels
61. The US attacked Venezuelan boats it says are carrying drugs. Is Venezuela sending drugs to the US? - PolitiFact, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.politifact.com/article/2025/sep/22/Trump-Venezuela-boat-strikes-drugs-trafficking/
62. Tren de Aragua: Fact vs. Fiction | Open Virtual Panel - YouTube, accessed September 29, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwmxd9ljhyM